ARGENTINA: THE SIGNS AND IMAGES OF “REVOLUTIONARY WAR”

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In 1966, the Argentinian army called General Juan Carlos Onganía to lead the new government after the coup against elected President Arturo Illia. Under Onganía’s rule, the violent civil conflict haunting the country increased. In 1969, there was severe unrest in the city of Córdoba, the “Córdobazo,” an uprising that heralded the end of Onganía’s presidency. In 1970, General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse seized power and opened the country to free elections, which were held in March 1973. Juan Domingo Perón, who had already been president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955, was re-elected after he returned from exile in 1973. After his death in 1974, his second wife Isabel occupied his office until she was deposed in a coup by officers under the leadership of General Jorge Videla in March 1976.

In the “Dirty War” of this new regime, a campaign of destruction began against left-wing workers, unionists, critical intellectuals, and journalists. Many students were also targeted. When their mothers protested on the central “Plaza de Mayo,” demanding information on the fate of their children, they exposed themselves to mortal danger. According to official statistics, around 13,000 opponents of the regime were killed or disappeared without trace under the bloody military dictatorship. Human rights experts estimate that almost twice as many people were affected. It is only recently that the courts have started to work their way through this historical period.

In order to define the repercussions the French May had on the situation in Argentina, it is advisable to discard the simple notion of a “center versus the periphery.” It was not a single event that spurred the spirit of rebellion spreading throughout Latin America but rather a variety of overlapping discourses. There was no global 1968, and all attempts to press this date into one political or historical framework, either during the events or afterwards, are untenable. In addition, looking at the 1960s in Argentina while concentrating on 1968 irremediably delays the achievements of an entire era. This date is too late to begin if one wants to understand all of the ideas, movements, and the politicization of issues that the great myth of the revolution contains.
The main components of this political and cultural construct had been present since the beginning of the decade: the struggle in the Third World, Algeria, Vietnam, and—above all—the revolution in Cuba. Revolutionaries were certain that the revolution would follow an irreversible historical course, first asserting itself in the peripheral countries. A student revolt could not shake this belief and could only be regarded with a mixture of astonishment and sympathy, if not mistrust, which the historical outcome soon justified: a movement led by the academic middle classes could not overthrow a consolidated capitalist state that—sustained by a working class that believed in reformism—formed part of the imperialistic domain.

This political interpretation, however, did not prevent left-wing intellectuals in Argentina—who derived their ideas primarily from French philosophers (from Jean-Paul Sartre to Louis Althusser)—from evoking images of the Paris barricades of 1871. It was only after the fact, however, that the impression of a homogeneity to all these rebellions, embodied in the image of Argentine-born revolutionary Che Guevara as an icon of all kinds of non-conformity, was constructed. Looking back from the present, where such struggles lie deep in the past, one tends to overemphasize the cultural and moral aspects of that time (anti-authoritarism, youth cultures, and anti-establishmentarianism). But in order to truly evaluate this period and save it from anachronisms, it is necessary to recall the conceptualization of the revolutionary war.

The founding of guerrilla movements

The impulse for rebellion in Argentina actually did come from a different place. In 1959, the successful Cuban Revolution spread the strategy of “foquismo.” That same year, the first attempt to create a rural guerrilla group took shape, the so-called Uturuncos. A second attempt in 1963, the EGP (Ejército Guerrillero del Pueblo [The People’s Guerrilla Army]) ended tragically. Ricardo Masetti led the group and called himself Comandante Segundo [Second Commander] because the first commander was Che Guevara, who intended to take over the leadership of the group in the future. This year also saw the appearance of Pasado y Presente [Past and Present]. This communist magazine severed ties with the old Soviet Party in the name of a new generation that declared itself to be “the expression of a historical process characterized by a strong leaning toward a revolutionary break.”

In 1966, after General Onganía’s military coup, another magazine was founded, Cristianismo y Revolución (C&R [Christianity and...
Revolution). It gave voice to a radical position that combined the anti-imperialistic nationalism of Peronism, the Guevarism, and a new Christian messianism with explosive results. From this point of view, the struggle was no longer about stating that the revolution was “the new sign of our times” nor about announcing the Third World as “the world of the revolutionaries.” More decisive was the insight that armed rebellion—following the example of the Colombian priest, liberation theologian, and guerilla fighter Camilo Torres—was “the only efficient and comprehensive means of expressing one’s love for all.”

**The rhetoric of armed revolution**

What happened in May 1968? C&R, the dominant magazine for the Peronist and Guevarist Left, did not mention the events in Paris even once. The French influence was focused on the work of Régis Debray, who was often cited and interviewed before and after his disastrous adventure in Bolivia. He was an intellectual who claimed that the gun should replace—and direct—the pen. The magazine’s international coverage was dominated by expressions of solidarity with the struggling peoples in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (the first Conferencia Tricontinental had been held in Havana in 1966). Aside from Vietnam and the fighting in the Third World, above all in Latin America, the magazine only included international news about the “Black Power” Movement, which it regarded as representative of oppressed minorities in the United States, with any regularity. Che Guevara had been killed in Bolivia in 1967, and in Cuba, 1968 was proclaimed to be “the year of the heroic guerrilla.” In Argentina, it seemed that the conditions for armed revolution were not at hand; the political and economic power of Onganía’s dictatorship had stabilized.

Nonetheless, the situation changed decisively when the former Argentinian president Juan Perón turned to the rhetoric of armed revolution. In October 1967, prompted by Che’s death, he stated that “He was one of us” and lamented the “irretrievable loss for peoples fighting for liberty.” But the real shift occurred in May 1969, when the cycle of protest that ended in the Córdobazo (the brutal suppression of a citizen’s revolt in the provincial capital of Córdoba) gave rise to the notion of popular insurrection, even in the cities. Although the first victims were students, the groups of mobilized workers later comprised a driving force in the movement and also suffered substantial loss of life.
The Peronist guerilla organization, Montoneros, came into being in May 1970, when it abducted and murdered General Pedro Aramburu. In September that same year, the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo [The People’s Revolutionary Army]) was founded. What happened next is well known: the story ended just a few years later in a state-orchestrated massacre—the military takeover in March 1976—and in a new, incomparably brutal dictatorship that lasted until 1983.

**Paris, Prague, Buenos Aires**

I would like to turn again to the overlapping images of the barricades in Paris and Córdoba and to the complicated entanglement of encounters and evasions, of misunderstandings and small myths, that arise from them. Even though C&R did not mention the French May, it did cover another great European event in 1968—the Prague Spring, which the Soviet invasion stamped out. As is well known, Fidel Castro approved of this intervention, which astonished many people. Thus, he began to end the experiment to construct a socialism independent of the Soviet model. The lesson was clear: if civil society got involved in a way that exceeded the party’s established boundaries, it led inexorably to the apostasy of liberalism and the demise of the revolution.

The Cuban leader has adhered resolutely to this position for over forty years. C&R, the magazine of the Argentinian Guevaristas, fell in line with this position: the military intervention in Czechoslovakia was an unfortunate necessity that, though it revealed errors in the construction of a new society, was justifiable considering the risk of a socialist country falling to the imperialistic camp. Even if the “new
man” of socialism did not (yet) exist, one could at least count on the international “solidarity” of Soviet troops. The magazine made no secret of its criticism of the Soviet parties, thus agreeing with the new Latin American and European Left. Furthermore, it held them responsible for “betraying” Che Guevara in Bolivia. Nevertheless, ideological differences concerning ideas and strategies in the Third World struggle died out when confronted with the larger, bipolar world of the Cold War. If Che had still been alive in 1968, would he have expressed a different idea?

The contradictory texture of an era

Finally then, with regard to the retrospective visions that seem to grow out of wishful thinking—as in the writings of Carlos Fuentes—and seek to align the French May with the Prague Spring and Latin American rebellions, one ought to first reconstruct the raw and contradictory texture of this historic era. So close to and yet so distant from the present, this era cannot be pressed into simple schemata nor invoked in embellished legends in line with the banal narratives on the epos of longing and imagination.

After all, in this history, on the Latin American side, there is a great deal of blood and a large number of dead. Out of respect for them—and for the truth—we must bear witness to and interpret this age in a responsible manner. We must continue to research, rethink, and retell the history of this period, which is still far from having revealed all of its enigmas.

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